

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 2820

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT PFOR CO PN US
SUBJ: THE WEEK IN COLOMBIA

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: THE LIGHT RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC ATTESTED TO THE ABSENCE FROM BOGOTA OF A SIZEABLE PORTION OF ITS MIDDLE AND UPPER INCOME GROUPS. THE SEMANA SANTA EXODUS, WHICH HAD STARTED ON THE PRECEDING WEEKEND, GATHERED MOMENTUM AND BY WEDNESDAY THE CAPITAL CITY WAS GEARING DOWN FOR THE FOUR-DAY EASTER WEEKEND. DURING THE PRECEDING DAYS THE PUBLIC HAD FOLLOWED WITH INTEREST THE PRONOUNCEMENTS ISSUING FROM PANAMA WHERE PRESIDENT LOPEZ WAS MEETING WITH THE LEADERS OF PANAMA, COSTA RICA AND VENEZUELA. FROM A COLOMBIAN POINT OF VIEW THE MOST IMPORTANT STATEMENT WAS THE CAREFULLY WORDED PRONOUNCEMENT BY PRESIDENT LOPEZ IN WHICH HE "RENOUNCED" THE RECEIPT OF ISTHMIAN TRANSIT RIGHTS FROM THE US (AS GUARANTEED IN THE 1914 URRUTIA-THOMPSON TREATY) AT SUCH TIME AS PANAMA WOULD BE IN A POSITION TO EXTEND SIMILAR PRIVILEGES (BOGOTA 2759). DURING THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S 72 HOUR ABSENCE, ACTING PRESIDENT DESIGNADO TURBAY WAS DULY INSTALLED AND LATER HELD A WELL PHOTOGRAPHED WORKING LUNCH WITH "HIS" CABINET. ALTHOUGH TURBAY'S EFFORTS TO GAIN PUBLICITY WERE RESTRAINED IN COMPARISON TO HIS EARLIER (CARLOS LLERAS ADMINISTRATION) ACTING PRESIDENCY, TURBAY'S REPUTATION PROBABLY WAS IN PART RESPONSIBLE FOR LOPEZ' MARCH 24 PRESS COMMENTS IN FAVOR OF

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MODIFYING THE PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION LAWS. END SUMMARY

2. DESIGNADO DAYS MAY BE NUMBERED. A MINOR CONTROVERSY OVER COLOMBIA'S PRESIDENTIAL-DESIGNATE (DESIGNADO) SYSTEM OCCURRED DURING THE WEEK, COINCIDING WITH PRESIDENT LOPEZ' TRIP TO PANAMA AND THE ASSUMPTION OF THE PRESIDENCY BY SENATE PRESIDENT AND DESIGNADO JULIO CESAR TURBAY. ON ASSUMING THE PRESIDENCY MARCH 21, TURBAY DEFENDED THE INSTITUTION OF DESIGNADO AS HAVING SERVED COLOMBIA WELL. CHAMBER OF REPS PRESIDENT LUIS VILLAR BORDA, WHO SWORE IN TURBAY, DESCRIBED THE INSTITUTION AS OUTMODED. FROM PANAMA, PRESIDENT LOPEZ IN A PRESS CONFERENCE MARCH 24 ALSO CRITICIZED THE SYSTEM, AND UPON RETURN TO BOGOTA PREDICTED THAT WHEN THE CONGRESS CONVENED IN ITS REGULAR SESSION BEGINNING JULY 20 IT WOULD CONSIDER MODIFYING THE SYSTEM. TURBAY, IN A MOVE CHARACTERISTIC OF HIS POLITICAL CAREER, QUICKLY BACKED AWAY FROM THE QUESTION, STATING THAT HE WOULD NOT PARTICIPATE IN THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE DESIGNADO. THUS ENDED TURBAY'S SO-CALLED SECOND ADMINISTRATION, THIS ONE OF 72 HOURS.

3. LAND INVASIONS EXPECTED IN BOGOTA OVER EASTER. WHILE MOST COLOMBIANS WERE PLANNING RELIGIOUS OR VACATION ACTIVITIES FOR THE FOUR-DAY EASTER HOLIDAY, BOGOTA AUTHORITIES WERE PREPARING TO THWART A POSSIBLE INVASION OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC LAND IN THE BOGOTA SPECIAL DISTRICT BY AN ESTIMATED 8,000 PERSONS. LEADERS OF THE POSSIBLE INVASION INCLUDE LEFTISTS AND PROFITEERS, THE LATTER OF WHOM HAVE A HISTORY OF "SELLING" PUBLIC LAND TO THE UNSUSPECTING. LAND INVASIONS IN COLOMBIA HAVE OCCURRED REGULARLY, BOTH IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT AS MUCH AS 40 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION OF BOGOTA LIVE IN HOUSING BUILT ON LAND ACQUIRED ILLEGALLY.

4. GUERRILLA ACTIVITY FLARES UP. GUERRILLA ACTIVITY PICKED UP DURING THE WEEK WITH TWO ASSAULTS BY THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA (FARC) ON TOWNS IN NORTHCENTRAL COLOMBIA. THE LARGER OF THE ATTACKS OCCURRED ON MARCH 21 ON THE TOWN OF GUADALITO CUNDINAMARCA, ABOUT 100 KMS NORTH/NORTHWEST OF BOGOTA. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS ABOUT 80 FARC GUERRILLAS EMPLOYING MORTARS AND GRENADES ATTACKED THE TOWN, KILLING ONE POLICEMAN AND WOUNDING 3 TO 5 OTHERS, AND DESTROYING A LARGE PORTION OF THE TOWN. THE GOVERNOR OF CUNDINAMARCA, IN A CONVERSATION WITH CONFIDENTIAL

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EMBASSY OFFICIALS, PLACED THE SIZE OF THE ATTACKING FORCE AT ABOUT 70, AND SAID THAT AFTER OVER-RUNNING THE COMMUNITY, THE FARC PROSELYTIZED THE INHABITANTS, AND CARRIED OFF A MEDIC AS WELL AS ALL OF THE TOWN'S FOODSTUFFS, REQUIRING THE GOVERNMENT TO AIRLIFT IN SUPPLIES.

5. IF THE REPORTS OF THE SIZE OF THE ATTACKING FORCE ARE TRUE, THE GUADALITO OPERATION WOULD BE THE LARGEST LAUNCHED BY THE

FARC IN MANY MONTHS. THE GOVERNMENT REACTION HAS BEEN STRONG:
A TIGHT CONTROL ON CIVILIAN MOVEMENT IN THE AREA AND 500 TROOPS
HELICOPTERED IN TO PURSUE THE GUERRILLA FORCE, REPORTED BY
GOVERNMENT SOURCES TO BE RETREATING IN THE DIRECTION OF THE
MAGDALENA RIVER.

6. A SMALLER ATTACK, ATTRIBUTED BY THE PRESS TO FARC, OCCURRED
ON MARCH 25 ON A RANCH NEAR MUTATA, IN NORTHWESTERN ANTIOQUIA.
THE RANCHER AND HIS MANAGER WERE KILLED BY THE GUERRILLAS,
WHO REPORTEDLY WITHDREW WITHOUT STEALING ANYTHING. ACCORDING
TO THE PRESS THE RANCHER COLLABORATED CLOSELY WITH THE AUTHORITIES
AND HAD RECENTLY ORGANIZED AN ANTI-RESTLING COMMITTEE.
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